



The Phoenix

Number 1 January 1985

For contributors to the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia

Compiled and distributed by Michael C. Jennings (ABBA Co-ordinator)

INTRODUCTION

I have introduced this newsletter as a convenient means of keeping contributors to the *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia* in touch with developments concerning the project and of other news of Arabian birds.

The first issue of any publication has to cope with the problem of getting off from a cold start and engendering interest and support amongst readers. I apologise that this issue comes mainly from my own pen but I sincerely hope that future issues will include articles from those currently in Arabia and notes from others interested in the birds of the peninsula. It is not intended that *The Phoenix* should publish lengthy scientific papers as there are many other suitable journals for that but there is plenty of scope for short contributions of local and current interest concerning resident and breeding birds and sites of interest, etc. Also its pages will be available for those seeking information and with announcements.

In March 1984 I wrote to all those I could trace who I understood were interested in birds and were in Arabia at the time. I introduced them to the plans for the atlas and sought their comments on the scheme and contributions for 1984, the trial year. The response was on the whole, extremely encouraging. Most thought the scheme was a very worthwhile means of adding to knowledge of Arabian birds. This response and volume of information received with the first reports convinced me that the project was viable and that there would be enough support and interest to proceed with the scheme. This is not to say there were no dissenting voices. Less enthusiastic remarks included the view that Arabia was too large and observers too few, as to make the idea impracticable. Another view was that most potential observers, were likely to be new to the Middle East and would far rather chase rare and exciting migrants than note the occurrence of House Sparrows *, Crested Larks and the other 'boring' residents. There is of course some validity to these comments but I am optimistic. I think that given a long enough period of data collection there will be good coverage of the whole peninsula. There will also be a considerable input from the literature and from other sources.

The atlas project and *The Phoenix* are at the present time a private initiative. One objective is that in due time all the information will be published in a book or in scientific journals but at the moment there are no firm plans for this. The other objective and perhaps the most important one, is that it is intended, as far as practicable, to make information available to contributors and

* See Form 2 for scientific names (and reference numbers) of all birds in this project.

others working on the birds of Arabia. For example it is intended to pass data collected to the *Holarctic Avian Speciation Atlas* which covers the whole of northern Eurasia and North America and also to remaining volumes of the *Handbook of the Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Other than the understanding with HASA there are as yet no ties with any organisation, society or sponsor, but I plan to foster as close a working relationship as possible with all local and regional ornithological and natural history groups. So far I have received some kind donations from atlas contributors to help with administrative expenses but efforts will now be made to secure the financial future of the scheme by seeking long term sponsorship. In the meantime any donations will be welcome.

REPORTING PROCEDURES

Contributors will find enclosed with this issue appropriate forms and instructions for use in 1985 and later years. Those who I know were in Arabia before 1984 will also receive a set of documentation for reporting data for 1983 and earlier years. Those who have records for earlier years and have not received the appropriate forms should let me know. Please note that I am interested in all relevant records of birds listed on Form 2, no matter how old or where in the peninsula they were observed. The atlas works on the basis that only the highest Breeding Evidence Code in each square is used for the maps. Therefore once code 16 is secured further records from that square are not necessary. However, whilst it is not essential to make a second or subsequent report of a species confirmed breeding in a particular square, it is highly desirable that subsequent records are reported as they will inevitably include extra information about the breeding season and nidification etc, which helps to complete the picture of the breeding biology of each species. Therefore repeat contributions for codes 10 - 16 will always be welcome. Would those who received the original 'Instructions for Contributors' please note that the new instructions include an extra Breeding Evidence Code, "X X" for records of sedentary species observed in suitable breeding habitat *outside* of the breeding season. (See Forms 1 & 2 for further details).

CONTRIBUTORS MEETING DECEMBER 1985

I hope to be able to arrange an informal get together of contributors and others interested over the Christmas - New Year holiday 1985-86. (Probably late December at my home). There will be a lot to talk about, experiences to exchange and slides to see and the 'results-so-far' will also be available for inspection. Would those who would like to come please let me know (send SAE) and I will let them have details of date and arrangements.

"The Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia is a magnificent conception. It will be the first major such enterprise for any desert area and I sincerely hope everyone will help to accomplish this important project". Derek Lees-Smith, Organiser, *Holarctic Avian Speciation Atlas*.

"I very much welcome your proposal to prepare the Arabian Atlas, I think it can only be of immense value to us all". Stanley Cramp, Chief Editor, *Birds of the Western Palearctic*.

"A sound knowledge of bird distribution is so often a prerequisite of many conservation decisions and priorities and thus an atlas of the breeding birds of Arabia must be warmly welcomed and supported. I hope that all OSME members will participate and that proper care is taken to avoid pinpointing the breeding sites of rare and vulnerable species". Richard Porter, Chairman, Ornithological Society of the Middle East.

"I am glad to learn of the Arabian breeding bird atlas project and *The Phoenix* newsletter and wish success to these commendable efforts". Prof. W Büttiker, Meteorological and Environmental Protection Agency, Saudi Arabia.

"I am delighted to hear of the proposals for an atlas scheme for the Arabian Peninsula. This ambitious project will undoubtedly reveal much new and valuable information on bird distributions. I bet there are some exciting discoveries". Dr J T R Sharrock, Organiser of the *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Britain and Ireland* and former Chairman of the EOAC.

FEATURE SPECIES: THE LAPPET-FACED VULTURE

In the last few years the range and status of the Lappet-faced Vulture in Arabia has been subject to considerable revision. Until 1981 most authors considered the species to be only a rare visitor, mostly in winter. It had been known as a breeding species in the Negev Desert (just north of the ABBA area) for sometime but

it was not found breeding in Arabia until 1982 when nests were found in Oman (Gallagher, 1982, *Bull. Brit. Orn. Club.*, 102:135-139). Then conclusive evidence of former breeding in Saudi Arabia was found (Jennings, 1982, *Sandgrouse* 4:114-115). In the last couple of years a whole series of other breeding occurrences have been noted, especially in central Saudi Arabia. Most nests have been found by Bob Fryer who has the ideal means and opportunity for finding their tree top nests - he pilots a helicopter on geological work in remote areas. All breeding records and other observations in Arabia to date are shown at Fig 1. Full details of the recent central Arabian records and a review of the species other occurrences in the peninsula have recently been published (Jennings & Fryer, 1984, *Fauna of Saudi Arabia*. Vol 6).

The latter paper touches on the occurrence of two other vultures in Arabia. Firstly it is now clear that old reports of tree-nesting Griffon Vultures were probably all incorrect and are most likely to refer to Lappet-faced Vultures. It is also likely that many previous records of Black Vulture are erroneous.

Because of the vulnerability of all vultures to disturbance and pesticides and their small population levels, information on the present range of all vultures is urgently needed. No less than six species are known or suspected of breeding in Arabia.

NEW BREEDING SPECIES

0012 *Podiceps nigricollis* Black-necked Grebe
Rather a lot of exciting breeding records have come from Qatar in recent years. These have mainly been 'wetland' species utilising recently created man made habitat and include Little Grebe, Ferruginous Duck, Avocet and Coot. In July 1984 Mrs Mair Hutton and others, found Black-necked Grebe with young at a sewage lagoon near Doha. Probably at least 3 pairs were involved. This species is a breeding resident in Iran and Iraq and there is a separate population in Africa. It usually only

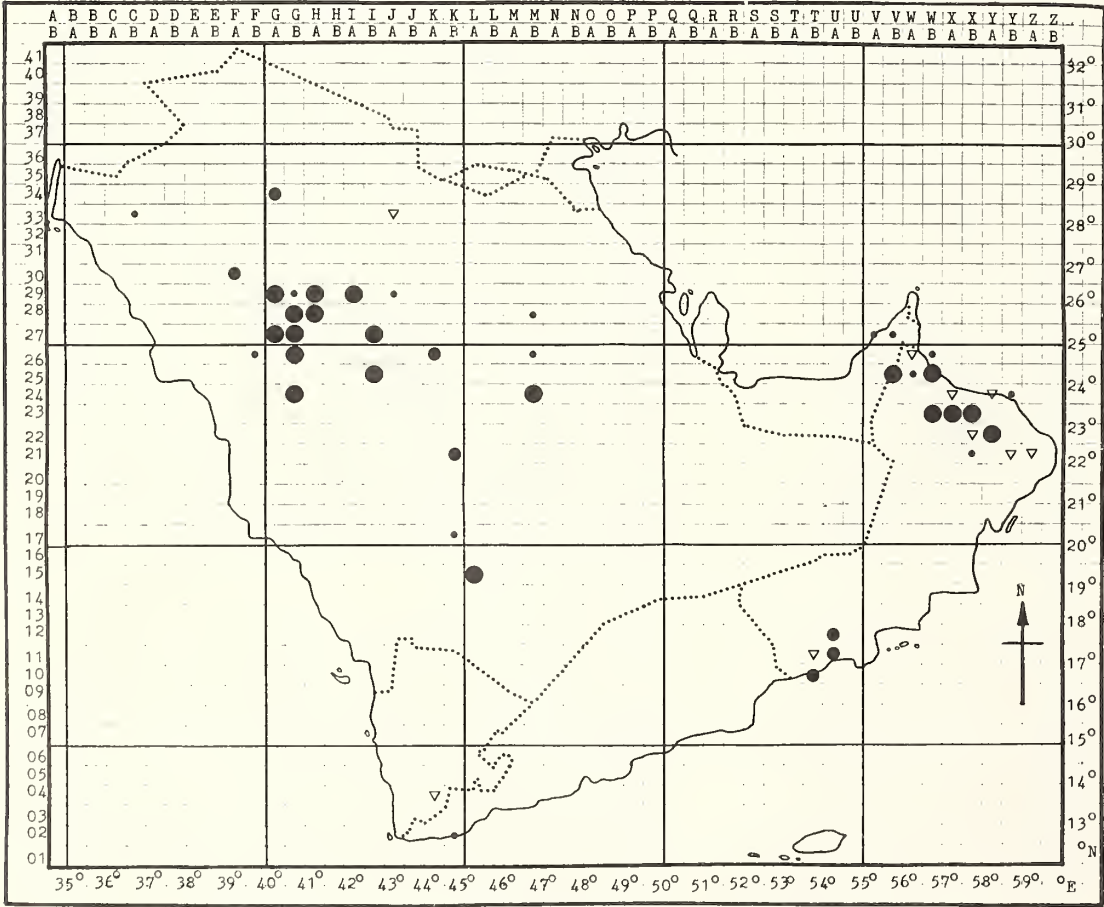


Fig 1.
Arabian breeding distribution of the Lappet-faced Vulture

- Confirmed (Codes 10-16)
- Probable (Codes 3-9)
- Possible (Codes 00-2)
- ▽ Other records

occurs in Arabia as a winter visitor although there have been several records for the summer months. This Qatari record is probably the most southerly breeding occurrence of the Eurasian race. A breeding occurrence of the African race, in the south west of the peninsula, is also possible.

0465 *Glareola pratincola* Collared Pratincole
Like the previous species this bird has geographically separated races in Africa and Eurasia. In June 1983 Chris Hobden found young birds near Jeddah Saudi Arabia that refused to take wing when approached and photos taken show obvious very young juveniles. The nearest other breeding locality is at Azraq Jordan, just north of the ABBA coverage.

ESCAPES AND INTRODUCTIONS

There have been a tremendous number of 'impossible' species seen in Arabia in recent years, mostly around the larger towns, where pet shops seem to do a thriving trade in avian exotica. Some species, which have escaped or been released have already established feral populations, for example the Common Mynah in some southern Arabian Gulf towns and at Jeddah. Others will almost certainly breed and possibly multiply. It is also noteworthy that some species of exotic bulbuls have hybridized with local species. A further twist is that resident species in one area have been transported by man to another area as was apparent in the case of the introduction of White-eared Bulbul to Riyadh, (Ramli & Jennings, 1982, *Bull Orn. Soc. Middle East* 8:2-3). There is a understandable tendency for observers to pass over escapes merely as a nuisance, rather than a source of any ornithological interest. However it is important that these birds are properly recorded, provided of course that they can be identified, which may be a considerable problem. It is possible that some local feral populations are the embryo of a future widespread range, others may become agricultural pests or of other economic importance. All information will be welcome.

HOLARCTIC AVIAN SPECIATION ATLAS: PLANNING PROGRESS

Mike has asked me to say a few words about HASA's progress at a most opportune time when we have just had a break-through. The Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology in Los Angeles has agreed to act as "accounting officer" for moneys donated to HASA by North American donors. I am very pleased about this as it takes care of the problems posed by US Federal and state law involved in dealing with such funding. Moving northwards to Ottawa, HASA will be holding a Round Table Discussion in the 19th International Ornithological Congress, being staged there 22-29 June 1986, which will be chaired by one of the North American members of the HASA Advisory Committee, which includes Henri Ouellet who is the 19th IOC Secretary-General. This RTD will report planning progress to date, discuss various problems and organizational details and provide information to potentially interested ornithologists. In the first half of 1985, an article on HASA will be published in *American Birds* by George A Clark Jr. who is another member of the HASA Advisory Committee. Regional developments are that Peter Browne has agreed to be the ADCO - that is, Area Data Collection Organizer - for the whole of the Sahara from 30N to the southern limits of the WPH area in Africa except for Egypt for which Peter Meininger and Wim Mullie are joint ADCOs. The south-western part of the Arabian Peninsula has posed problems of assignment to one or other of the major zoological realms from the viewpoint of animal distribution. I am currently preparing a MS on the composition and origins of the avifauna of this area dealing with this matter and which will be

offered to *Sandgrouse*. Mike Jennings is the HASA ADCO for both Saudi Arabia and for North Yemen and additionally is the HASA Regional Co-ordinator for the whole of the Arabian Peninsula. Effie Warr is the ADCO for Kuwait and the states on the Gulf, with Mike Gallagher for Oman who has already gathered much data for his recent book. We require ADCOs for Libya, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, so those interested should contact me as soon as possible. HASA record cards for use by ADCs - Area Data Collectors - under ADCO direction are available for inspection - just contact me. Whilst the Arabian Breeding Bird Atlas species code numbers are four-digit, 0001 for Ostrich upwards, those for HASA are six-digit based upon the volume and page numbers of Peters *Check-list of Birds of the World*. No problems are foreseen in respect of transfer of data from ABBA to HASA. The problems are in respect of localities of recorded breeding and habitats, but these remain to be resolved between Mike and myself. When funding is sufficient for HASA to commence operations, we shall let you know.

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SITES OF INTEREST

Layla Lakes Saudi Arabia (Square MB21)

This group of crystal clear, naturally occurring, lakes is unique in the central Arabian region and provides an isolated habitat for a small variety of waterbirds, whilst several desert species are found nearby. The lakes are situated at 22°02'N, 46°07'E, about 10 k

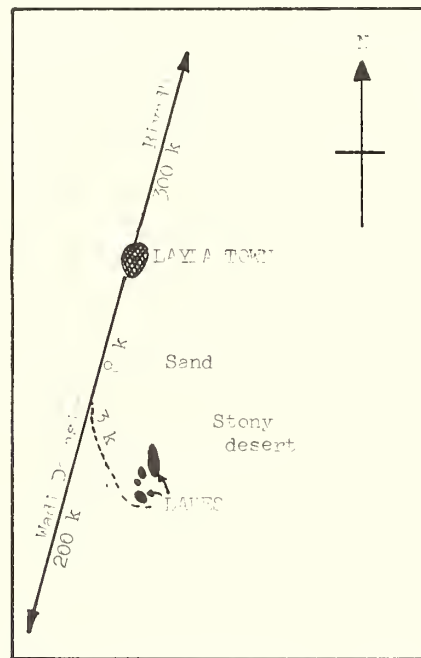


Fig 2. Position of Layla Lakes central Saudi Arabia

south of Layla town and lie in a slight depression between low shifting sand dunes to the west and rocky limestone desert to the east. The water is fresh, although it has a mineral taste, and supports considerable invertebrate life. However unlike the smaller pools and streams at Al Kharg 250 k north, no fish are present. There are four patches of water, the largest being about one kilometer long and 300 m wide which is frequented by bathers, but the others are undisturbed. The depth of the water is at least 30 m in places and the steep sides to the pools means that there are only small areas of mud, reedbeds

and emergent vegetation. Coarse grasses and bushes surround the lakes. The area is obviously attractive to migrant species of all kinds but no study of migration appears to have been done there. Confirmed breeding birds include Moorhen and Little Grebe presumably both residents, whilst Little Bittern, Little Ringed Plover, Coot and Savi's Warbler may also breed. Local birds which regularly visit the lakes to drink include large numbers of Crowned Sandgrouse, Rock Pigeon and Collared Dove, whilst nearby Little Green Bee-eater, Cream-coloured Courser, Kestrel, Long-legged Buzzard, Sand Partridge, Crested and Hoopoe Larks, Pale Crag Martin, Great Grey Shrike and Brown-necked Raven can be found. The Namaqua Dove has arrived in recent years as in other places in central Arabia. The Graceful Warbler has not managed to get to the Layla-Aflaq oasis area from the Eastern Province and confirmation is needed that the House Sparrow occurs. Undoubtedly other breeding/resident species will occur.



NEW BOOKS

An introduction to the wildlife of Bahrain
by M.Hill and P.Webb (1984)

Governments throughout the Middle East area are becoming increasingly aware of the diversity of biological resources within their boundaries also the concept of environmental conservation is fast gaining ground. One manifestation of this increased awareness is willingness to commission books and surveys on the natural history of the state. The most recent arrival is this introduction to Bahrain's wildlife. Its 176 pages (187 mm X 243 mm) are crammed with illustrations and photos of all kinds of plants and animals. Arrangement is by general habitat type, for example, coastline and seashore, plantations, freshwater areas, islands and deserts. Both authors are especially interested in birds and therefore the bias of the book towards ornithology can be excused. Of the 260 odd colour photos 133 are of birds. A full checklist of the island's birds can be found in the appendices, where there is also a review of the breeding birds and lists of mammals and reptiles found on the island. This book is published by the Bahrain Ministry of Information and is said to be on sale in Bahrain. It is not found in bookshops outside of the state and therefore those interested in obtaining a copy should write to the Minister of Information for details of availability. (Cost unknown).

Kuwait's natural history-an introduction
by D.Clayton and C.Pilcher (1984)

Of the same genre of the previous book but larger (217 mm X 300 mm) and 360 pages. Like the Bahrain book it is beautifully prepared, bound and illustrated, with some particularly attractive mammal pictures and many bird photos. All in full colour. It is a joint effort of many of the past and present members of the local Ahmadi Natural History and Field Studies Group and has been generously sponsored by the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation and the Kuwait Oil Company. Chapters are arranged by animal group, for example, invertebrates, reptiles, birds, shells, mammals etc with other chapters dealing with vegetation, conservation and other general issues. Apparently unobtainable outside of Kuwait and details of availability should be sought from the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation, P.O.Box 26565, Kuwait. (Cost unknown).

NEW ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY: NORTH YEMEN

The Ornithological Society of North Yemen has recently been formed. Details can be obtained from John Finch C/O British Embassy, Sanaa, N.Y. (Further details will be published in *Phoenix* 2.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Symposium on the fauna and zoogeography of the Middle East

A symposium on the fauna and zoogeography of the Middle East area including the whole of the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt and Turkey to Afghanistan, is to be held in Darmstadt, West Germany from 30 September to 3 October 1985. The language of the symposium will be English. Anyone wishing to attend or submit a paper on any topic related to animal distribution, evolution or taxonomy relative to the Middle East should write for details to Prof R Kinzelbach, Technische Hochschule, Darmstadt, Institut für Zoologie, Schnittpahnstrasse 3, 6100 Darmstadt, West Germany.

Ornithological Society of the Middle East: Annual General Meeting

The next OSME AGM is provisionally set for 6 July, venue to be announced.

FOR SALE

The Birds of South West Saudi Arabia (1984)

A 58 page report and systematic list; for a review see *OSME Bulletin* No 13. Available from the author, A J Staggs, P O Box 1732, Riyadh 11441, Saudi Arabia. Price £3.

THE PHOENIX - A VERY RARE BIRD

The Phoenix is a bird of mythology with special connections with Arabia. It has been described by Pliny to be the size of an eagle, with gold neck, purple body, azure tail and crested head. There was only one individual alive at any time and it lived for a thousand years before dying on its blazing nest of aromatic herbs. The new Phoenix grew from a worm spawned in the ashes of the nest.

The Phoenix logo for this newsletter was drawn by Keith Brockie.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PHOENIX

Short articles relevant to the aims of the ABBA project are welcomed, especially notes on the avifauna of local areas, sites of interest or concerning particular species. Notices, requests for information and advertisements of reports etc., are all free. Copy date for *Phoenix* 2 is 31st October 1984.

ORDERING PHOENIX

Phoenix is issued free to current contributors, if you are not a contributor and would like to receive it regularly please send £8.00 (\$12) for the next five issues. This single payment includes postage for all issues. Any profit will go towards ABBA administrative costs.

SPONSORSHIP RECEIVED

The Conservation Research Committee of the Ornithological Society of the Middle East has most generously provided a grant of £150 towards the costs of launching ABBA and for the first issue of *Phoenix*. Arthur Staggs has very kindly donated £25 towards administrative costs.

ADDRESS

All correspondence to *The Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia* and *The Phoenix* should be sent to Michael C Jennings, Moonraker Cottage, 1 Eastcourt, Burbage, Wiltshire, SN8 3AG, ENGLAND.